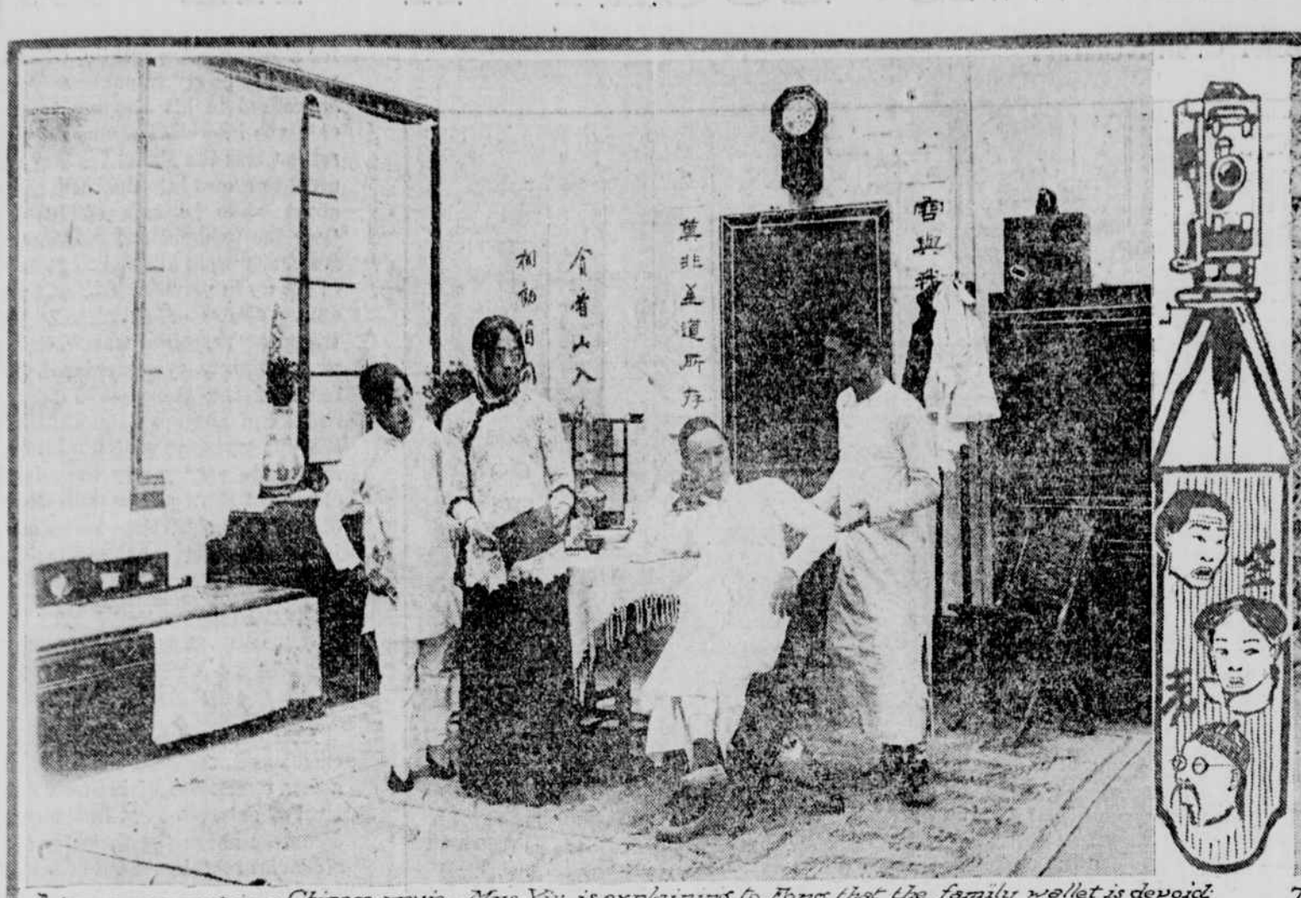
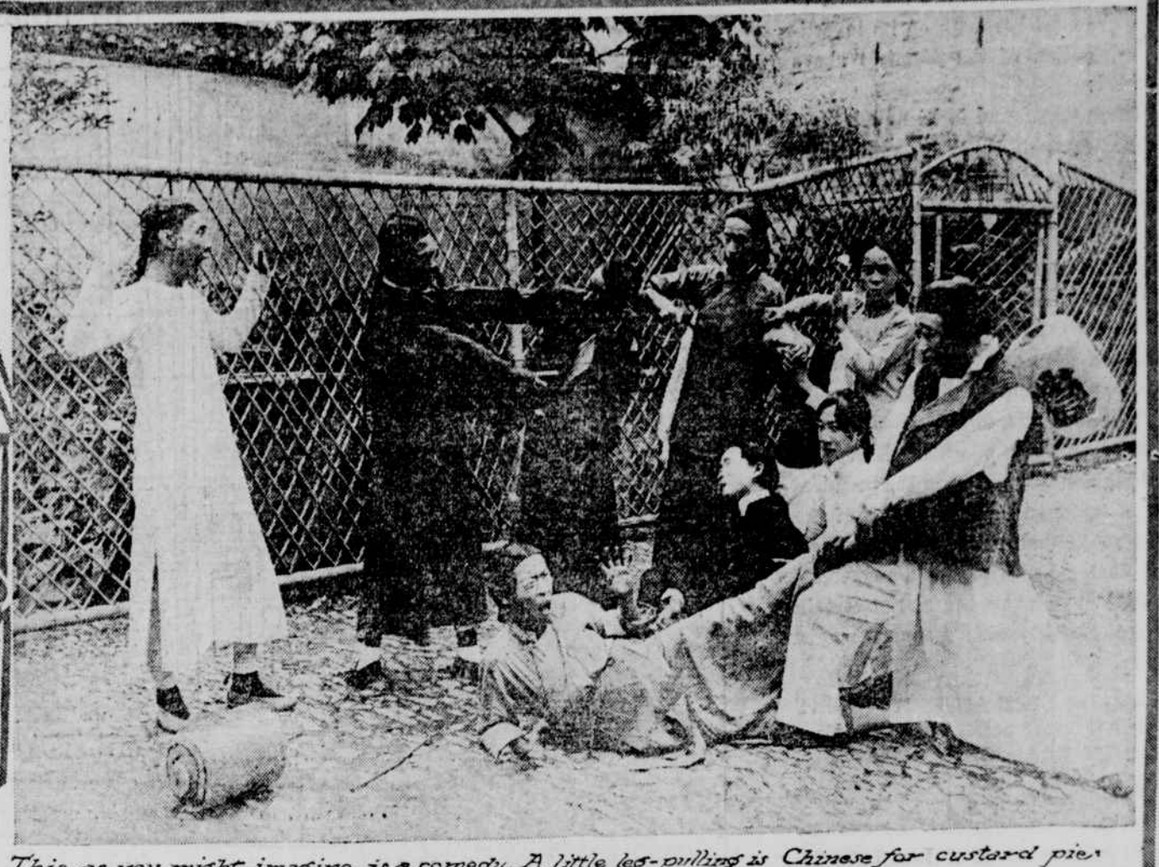
BRET HARTE SAID IT: THE HEATHEN CHINEE IS PECULIAR



A tense moment in a Chinese movie. Mrs. Yiu is explaining to Fong that the family wallet is devoid of tsien, tael or other coin of the realm, and it begins to look as though he'll have to open a laundry.



This, as you might imagine, is a comedy. A little leg-pulling is Chinese for custard pie.

For Ways That Are Dark and Tricks That Are Vain There Is Nothing to Surpass the Charley Chaplins and the Mary Pickfords of the Orient. Movies in China? Well, We Should Remark.

By GEORGE S. KAUFMAN.

BRET HARTE, I believe, furnished the first great example of how hard it is to get anything out of a Chinaman. Li Hung Chang, more recently, acquired fame for the queries that he propounded in an endeavor to keep others from questioning him. The news of the Chinese invention of gunpowder was kept under cover for a couple of centuries or more. And any one who has mislaid the ticket and tried to get three collars and a shirt out of hock knows that a stubborn taciturnity is the Chinaman's most marked characteristic. It is bred in the bone.

Come to think of it, there is no reason in the world why the motion picture business should not flourish in China as elsewhere. And there is no reason in the world why the Chinese should not make their own pictures, if they don't happen to like the European and American kinds. But it is a bit of a shock, nevertheless, to learn that the Chinese have been flocking to their movie houses for half a dozen years, that they nave been making their own pictures for five years, and, in short, that the business is highly organized and flourishing. For all of those things are true.

They leaked out, these facts, during the recent visit to these parts of one Benjamin Brodsky. They did not really leak out; they had to be pried out. Mr. Brodsky, although not an Oriental, has lived among the Chinese so long that he has absorbed a full share of the great national taciturnity. Mr. Brodsky, it developed, is the Marcus Loew of China. As head of the China Cinema Company, Limited, he enjoys practically a monopoly of the business in the land of the Celestials. He controls eighty moving picture theatres, scattered from Peking to Kong-Tchang, and from Canton to Tyng-Choo. And he maintains fully equipped studios in Shanghai and in Hong Kong, where he employs hundreds of persons in the manufacture of Chinese motion pictures. Something about this industry in China is herewith set down in type for the first time.

Benjamin Brodsky was not an American movie man who carried the business to China. On the contrary, he did not know a great deal more about pictures than the several million other residents of China. In China he spent all but his earliest years, and in the course of the process he mastered no less than four of the fearsome Chinese dialects. To learn one of them is a life job, and even Mr. Brodsky admits that four is enough. To-day his English is strongly tinctured with Chinese. He is a mandarin, as well as the possessor of sundry other Chinese honors, and when he appends his various insignia he may go anywhere in the kingdom (or republic) without fear.

When motion pictures became the craze a few houses sprang up in Shanghai and Hong Kong and some of the other slightly cosmopolitan Chinese cities. They showed European pictures, with an occasional American subject, and drew their audiences largely from the resident foreigners. Brodsky, having an intimate knowledge of the country, conceived the idea of carrying the pictures to the great cities of the interior—cities of uncounted millions. His first house, established in one of the great unpronounceable cities, contained little more than four walls. To this day there are no seating accommodations for the multitude in the Chinese movie houses—the Interborough would find it a delightful country. A few of the patrician Chinese buy seats and pay handsomely for them ($1.50, in most cases); the common people stand on the great floors, wedged tightly against one another. Many of the Brodsky theatres take care of 15,000 persons in this manner; the smallest of them holds 5,000. If there were seats, explains Mr. Brodsky, he could never get his audiences out. They would sit down and stay there until driven out by hunger.

When he opened his first theatre Mr. Brodsky made up a choice programme composed of one of those French wrong-apartment mix-ups and a bronco-busting Western melodrama. He opened his theatre, but nobody came. They didn't know they were expected to come. In fact, they didn't know anything about it at all. So Mr. Brodsky started out to round up his first audience. He got it by paying it to attend—surely a procedure unique in the annals of showdom. One at a time, he interviewed Chinamen and paid them to go to see his show. He gave them what they asked—one tsien, two or ten. He didn't care a great deal, because he knew that they would pay back the money on future occasions as soon as they found out what was going on.

In this manner several dozen theatres were put on their feet, in cities all over China, but the audiences never derived their full measure of enjoyment from the proceedings because they too frequently failed to understand them. The printed portions of the films were translated into Chinese, of course, but the human motives could not be. There sprang up a demand for the Chinese photoplay, and Mr. Brodsky saw that he would have to satisfy it. Then and there was founded the Chinese Cinema Company.

A touching rural drama. Flash on screen: "Won't you have a little opium, Chowetta?"

Mr. Brodsky is the only American connected with this enterprise. The consulting committee, for example, is made up of such sterling Chinamen as Kim Louey O'Hoy, Ma Yat Chiu, Fong Fu Gam and the like. At their two studios they are turning out a picture a week these days, and these make the rounds of their eighty theatres. One of their films is almost certain to reach this country within another year. It is "The Empress of Dowers," and is in twelve reels. The government loaned a huge segment of the Chinese army for use in this film—60,000 men.

At the Shanghai studio, which is the larger, Mr. Brodsky and his associates maintain a stock company of three hundred actors. At all events, they are actors to as great an extent as the Chinese ever can be actors. Mr. Brodsky picked them up where he could find them, for he knew that they would be no harder to train than any others. Their trouble is a lack of imagination. Take the genial soul stretched out on the ground in one of the accompanying stills—the one who is having his leg pulled. Before he could be persuaded to exhibit such obvious signals of distress it was found necessary to administer a sound beating, whereupon he cried.

"If I want a man to laugh and be glad," explained Mr. Brodsky, "I have to take him out and show him a good time. I give him a fine meal, with plenty to drink, and then march him right to work. That is about the only way I can get a comedy scene."

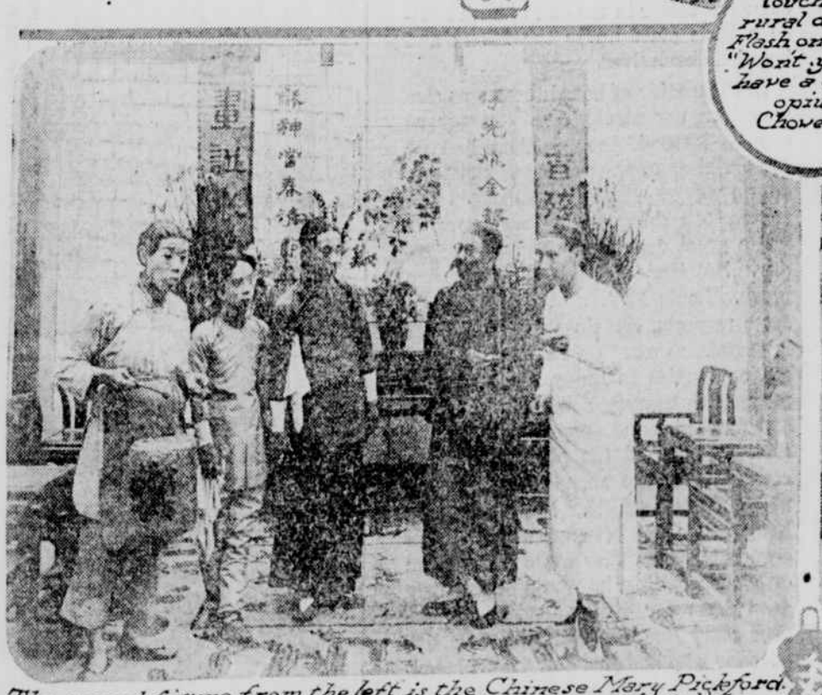
Thus, when it is desired to show a Chinese family at dinner, an ordinary motion picture dinner will not do. There must be regular food. And five minutes later, if it is discovered that there wasn't any film in the machine, there must be another dinner served if the director wants a retake.

The Chinese films, most of them, are bound up with the traditions and the fetishes that are China. Ancestor worship, of course, plays a prominent part in many of them. The Chinese superstitions, also, are constantly getting in the way of the pictures, and many and horrible are the threats that have to be resorted to in order to persuade actors to perform the prescribed stunts. One performer, for example, refused flatly to be photographed in a coffin, citing the highest religious authorities on the question and declining to put himself in line for the visitations of the evil one. As a method of persuasion he was overpowered, placed in the coffin and made to stay there for thirty-six hours, with the additional promise that he would be kept there forever if he refused to listen to reason. Thereupon the scene was taken. These little incidents, however, render movie making in China a somewhat uncertain profession.

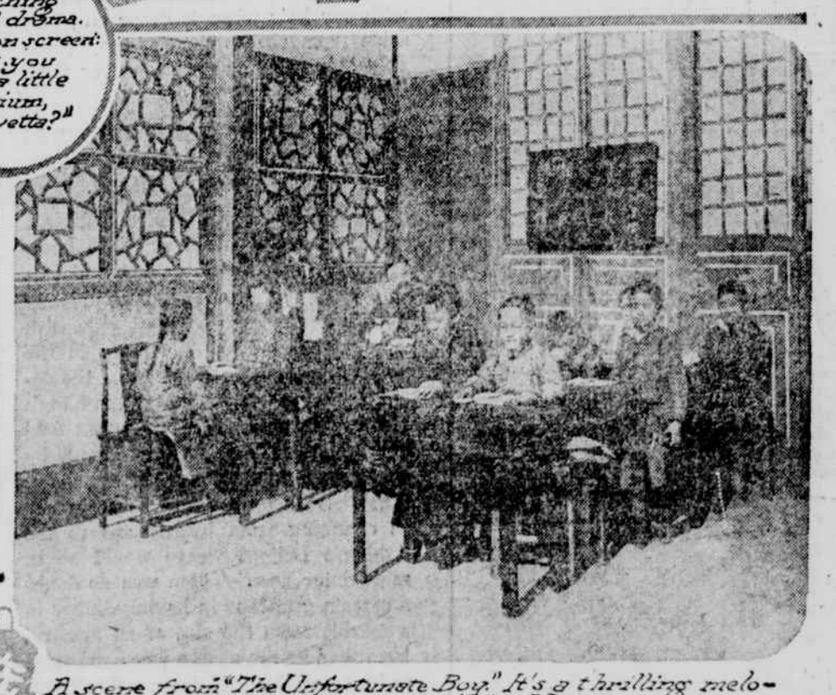
"The Unfortunate Boy," a scene from which is reproduced below, contains enough melodrama to be an American movie. Stripped of its Chinese motivation, in fact, it might be shown in any New York film emporium, and probably will. Lo Sing Pak was happily married, and possessed of a son. Along came Ng Chung Wun, who fell in love with Lo's wife. So he murdered Lo and married the wife. He fears, however, that Lo's son will learn the story of his father's murder when he grows up, and obtain revenge by exterminating the murderer. Therefore he decided that it would be safer for him if the boy did not grow up, and kills him. (That, of course, is what was unfortunate for the boy.) Having got the Chinese audience interested by a couple of murders, the story proceeds to work itself out. In China, although the government holds a restraining hand over certain features of the films, there is no real censorship. Murder and other things may be freely shown upon the screen.

In his Shanghai company Mr. Brodsky has a comedian who is infinitely more humorous than the celebrated Mr. Chaplin (or so he is regarded in China), and it may be that he will be seen in this country before very long. After all, by way of winding up with a snappy exit speech, there is an excellent reason why Chinese actors should be better than those of any other country:

Because they never forget their queues!



The second figure from the left is the Chinese Mary Pickford. The plot of this one is rather complicated, as you can tell by the bewildered expression of the man on the extreme left.



A scene from "The Unfortunate Boy." It's a thrilling melodrama, and it stood 'em up in Chu-Yan.